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Obituary

Anne Doris Hutchings (née Damant)

Born 3rd March 1936

Died 2nd April 2013



Anne Hutchings was born in Durban on 3rd March 1936, the first of two girls. Her mother was an artist and her father a banker with a strong creative streak. She was a keen ballet dancer through her school years, and thereafter enrolled for architectural studies at Wits, where she met her husband Geoffrey. Their first two children, Catherine and Michael, were born in London, to where they had moved in 1960, to endure five years of exile. During this time Geoffrey was teaching and Anne worked in an architect's/town planner's office, doing among other projects, some design on Peter Seller's house.

Missing Africa, they moved to Malawi, where Sarah and Veronica were born. In 1975 the family returned to South Africa; first to Grahamstown, then to Umtata in 1978, and in 1985 to Empangeni. After the tragic deaths of Geoffrey, their daughter Sarah and grandson Timothy in a car accident in 1996, Anne remained active in the

community, appreciating friends and opportunities to contribute to life and health, moving only last year to stay with Veronica in Durban, and straightaway finding people to benefit from her caring attentions.

Her children treasure memories of a delightful mother, making all their clothes, reading stories to them, dancing with them, walking in forest, veld and mountains with exciting views and discoveries of plants and flowers and creatures, all duly sketched en route. At home her table was always full of papers, drawings and various tools of her art, a chaos from which emerged beautiful creations in paint, etching, drawing, linocuts and embroidery, not to mention marvellous mixtures of healing and life-giving powders, ointments and potions. Her gardens were also never neat and conventional, but full of exciting stuff, with magical corners, odd outgrowths, select undergrowth and delicate special blossoms.

As her children became more independent, she took up travelling around the countryside, collecting and illustrating intricate and delicate grassland plants as researcher and herbarium curator at the former University of Transkei in Umtata (1983–1986). Geoffrey delighted to

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support her as chauffeur! She became more interested in the properties of the plants, and later joined the Botany Department at the University of Zululand as a researcher in 1987, proceeding to a Master's degree from the University of Natal (now known as University of KwaZulu-Natal) in Pietermaritzburg, under the supervision of Professor Johannes van Staden. The MSc degree was awarded *cum laude* in 1992.

Her seminal work on the medicinal properties of indigenous plants and their use in traditional healing among the Zulu people culminated in the publication in 1996 of the book "Zulu Medicinal Plants – An Inventory" of which she was the lead author. This monumental piece of work was published after Geoffrey's death.

Anne reached out beyond the usual boundaries of botany, engaging with traditional healers and exploring links and similarities between different cultures in terms of plants and rituals: Her paper "Ritual Cleansing, Incense and the Tree of Life – Observations on Some Indigenous Plant Usage in Traditional Zulu and Xhosa Purification and Burial Rites" in *Alternation* 14,2 (2007) shares some of this exploration.

She had a strong relationship with the KwaZulu-Natal Herbarium and was a significant member of the Zulu Botanical Knowledge Group. Besides publishing her work, Anne also made a point of presenting papers

on her work – particularly at IPUF (the Indigenous Plant Use Forum) and at SAAB (South African Association of Botanists) conferences.

Anne's expertise as an ethno-botanist grew together with her active assistance and support of the many poor and suffering people she found in Zululand; in natural treatments, nutritious foods and strengthening oils for therapeutic massage. Together with her gentle but strong compassion, and despite much personal adversity, she brought healing and hope to many, and encouragement to grow nutritious and therapeutic indigenous plants.

Anne was a graceful woman, living her faith humbly in a generous response to life and with a radical love and compassion for others, truly stronger than death.

She is survived by her children Catherine, Michael and Veronica, and grandchildren Bernadette, Jessica, Matthew, Justin, Ben and Daniel.

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